

PATHS OF LIFE

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The following excerpts are from Puran Singh's autobiography, On Paths of Life, which the author described as 'an attempt to relive back in the infancy, in dreams of youth and forget the calculations and plans of an experienced and tired intellect.' —Ed.

JAPANESE REMINISCENCES (1900-1904)

IN Japan, though a University student, I was accorded such warmth of treatment that I began considering myself a great man in this respect, that I was in some way the honoured representative of my country. I represented in Japan, the Land of the Great Buddha and they must have found in me what, even then, I never imagined in myself. Our privilege was that however poor and foolish, we Indians were the countrymen of the Lord Buddha. The pride of this knowledge came naturally to me in Japan. In those days, a group of Phillipine patriots had fled to Japan, and lived as the sorrowful compatriots of Dr. Jose Risal. They were like birds whose nests had been destroyed. The Phillipine Isles had passed into the civilising protection of the Americans. Then there were a few Chinese students and the Korean patriots who were cursing Japan for her Imperialism. And thus the whole of Asia represented in its defeat in Japan the victorious, a picturesque oriental assemblage of a few scattered patriots. And we met as Asiatics, smiled at each other, ate the Japanese cakes and drank the tea in the cherry parks. It was here that now a Phillipine patriot stood up to speak and

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then a Chinese and then an Indian. Of all the Indian students in Tokyo, I had what they called eloquence, it must have been an unconscious eloquence. I spoke many times in this Oriental Club on India. And we took but boyish delight with all the seriousness of a solemn discussion in abusing the British for having taken our country, for having ground us fine into a wholesale subjection. We were conquered to our very marrow, our traditions, legends, religions, social pride, all were being Anglicised. Our national costume was being altered, and our homes were being destroyed by these alien influences from within and without. And so we learnt from the Phillipines of the tyrannies they imagined and have suffered at the hands of the Americans. The 'water curing' adopted by the Americans to get news from the Phillipine patriots of the whereabouts of their compatriots was a horrible method of torture. The soap solution was pumped in through the mouth and the American soldiers then sat over the overfull bellies of the poor people till they confessed and betrayed their friends or died. Few could stand this torture and the patriots were hunted out and executed.

We learnt how the Phillipines revolted against the Spanish. And the revolution was caused by one book, the great novel of Dr. Jose Risal. And the scene of his imprisonment and execution brought tears to our eyes and we wept together. His American fiancée sat outside the iron grates of the prison door, as Dr. Jose Risal wrote his last song and gave it to her to take to his people and he was taken away to be shot.

The Chinese talked of their country. Our friend Chang told us how they wished to go and get rid of the foreigners.

The Koreans blamed Japan for doing exactly what we were condemning in the Americans and the British.

In this peculiar assemblage of not four *dervishes*, but many *dervishes*, we talked and wept and made resolutions of going and causing wars of independence in our country. Very confidentially we conferred with each other as to whether Japan could arm us and help us in our struggle for liberty. We tried to whisper to our Japanese friends our hopes and

aspirations and many of them sympathised deeply and we grew still more hopeful.

It was under the auspices of this Oriental Association of the patriots of Asia, we met Okakura, Miss Macleod, the disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Miss Scheruswesky, a beautiful Russian Lady, and a few American women painters who had joined Okakura's School of Art, the Bijitsuen as against the Tokyo Art Academy, to learn the secrets of Japanese Art-Idealism.

Okakura met us with great heart. One day, we were invited to his residence. A few Geishas were twanging their *Kotos*, a few were distributing Sake in tiny cups and the guests were in the elevated mood of tea-ism. Mr. Okakura offered us those delights, but being foolishly and ignorantly obsessed with so called 'moral notions' of the foolish priests, hanging as appendages in our uninformed minds, we refused. I regret now I refused that beverage of human suffering. I repeat now, I wondered then why Okakura drank. I regret I misunderstood even for a moment that great lover of the beautiful, that king of Japanese aesthetes. But I with another Indian student R. Ray thought ourselves purer than the purest art-forms of Geisha. How mean and foolish was our outlook on life and art not to have been able to attune ourselves to that soft kissing of the Sake cups, that soft nimbus of glory of inebriation in the whole room, that spiritual atmosphere of art, how unfortunate was our blindness and positive meanness. Owing to our ignorance we missed all that superb pleasure of the few moments of human elevation that comes like the visits of angels in this universal depression of human sorrow and suffering. It was truly Buddhistic. Alas, we were then much too Hinduistic. Okakura came out as we started to go, right up to the door. The night was dark, the lamps were subdued. And Okakura said, 'Puran San, I am for India.' And here he tore open his *kimono* knot, bared his breast and said, 'Behold, this bosom burns for India.' And I saw one of the lamps threw up a flame, and the bosom of Okakura was burning for human freedom. The author of the great simple sentence 'Asia is one' was trying to sprinkle wine

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over that flame. Where this flame does not burn, the wine makes but dirty mud of human clay; but where the flame burns, only the flame is fed. Alas, I knew not. I loved Okakura. I gazed at him, as he sat talking with his rather large eyes for a Japanese, half closed, shot with the red of that sacred passion.

Miss Macleod was the ardent disciple of the famous Swami Vivekananda. She wished that Swami Vivekananda would visit Japan once. And to invite the great monk, she succeeded in sending Okakura to Calcutta. Okakura met Sister Nivedita and here the two great souls worked on Okakura's first great book, *The Ideals of the East*. Sister Nivedita's introduction here is perhaps a master-piece in that particular form of literature.

Miss Macleod seemed to me a child who was pleased with her toy and I think Vedanta as preached by Swami Vivekananda gave her a few good sentences which enabled her to spend her days in a kind of fool's paradise. It was certainly impossible to expect the intensity of an Eastern philosopher in her or even full understanding of that life. She passed her days in Japan, looking at pictures and sleeping under the roofs of the ancient Buddhistic temples of Japan. Possibly in the Zen sect of the Japanese Buddhism, she found her Vivekananda. More or less man-ised, Miss Macleod shared with greater appreciation and zest the artistic parties of Okakura. Miss Macleod loved to be praised and we praised her to our heart's satisfaction.

About a year after, I succeeded to start with the help of Dr. Takakutsu, Messrs Sakur, Hirai, Tanaka, Yamagata Murai Honda, Yuasa and other friends an Indo-Japanese club of which I was the Secretary. This Indo-Japanese club has now developed into an important Indo-Japanese Association which is doing very useful work in advancing the commercial and social relations between the two countries. And under the auspices of this Association we welcomed Indian guests, and talked on the advancement of Indian students in Japan. We had a house to ourselves with a staff and four or five of us living in the Club. It is here that I was one day

surprised by the visit of an angelic Indian monk whose face I loved at first sight, but whose name I knew not. But as he entered, his presence was resonant with song: his very flesh sounded like a flowing stream. There was a sweet divine murmur round him. A murmur that is no more the feature of modern human personality. Where he sat or slept, the murmurs were still audible.

'I have come to seek you. Your name was on my lips on deck of the steamer. I was singing of the infinite. And you are the Infinite.' This is how he accosted me. I felt like a woman agitated with passion for a strange great man.

'My aim, Sir, from my infancy has been to turn a Yogi.'

'You are a Yogi. What is Yoga but rising above the body consciousness, above the finite and being infinite at all points of self-consciousness.'

We had an invitation to speak at a Buddhist Convocation where 'foreign' guests were invited in great number. Kanzo Uchimura, the Carlyle of Japan was to speak on Christianity and the newly arrived charming monk, I thought, might speak on the Hindu religion. So we started. It was many miles away. In a tram-car, I sat on a bench opposite to the orange-robed monk. But I did not look at him. I threw my head against the pane and began dying in the sound of 'O—O—O—Mum, O, O, You, You, Sum—or OIM,' as his very presence recited it. I died all the way in it. When the destination came the conductor touched me. I got down and so did Swami Rama Tirath of the Punjab—this was his name. The hall of the University of many hundred 'mats' was full, the Japanese audience was squatting on the floor, the foreign guests were given seats on one side of the raised dais and Kanzo Uchimura had just got up to speak. Kanzo Uchimura did always imitate the pose of Carlyle. I had met him many times ere this. He felt his moral stature was higher than any one he met. He wrote and spoke in lofty tones. And he wished to be left severely alone by his admirers. In his appreciations he was certainly poignant, penetrating and original. He had sensitive nostrils and was endeavouring to be a prophet and a disciple. But the vanity that he possessed

regarding his capacities, which were remarkable, was the very opposite of Carlylean.

Uchimura lectured on, and no foreigner understood a word, as he spoke in his Carlylean Japanese.

Then the President, a Buddhist priest in his grand sacramental robes, who knew me, asked me to introduce Swami Rama Tirath to the audience. I was in a fluid condition and I flowed out in a stream of eloquence. Swami Rama spoke, but he had so much to say that his eloquence took the final form of mere shrieks and cries. The foreign members of the audience said he was remarkable and they began evincing great interest in him. A Theosophical lady from Australia tried to persuade him to go to Australia.

When we were returning home, Swami Rama told me that I had a great gift of dying and then waking up with strange powers. He was, he said, in search of men of such gifts. 'You be mine', said he, 'it is wonderful how you were in a trance in the tram-car and how volcanic in eloquence on the platform. Your oration was unpremeditated but it was a treat.'

I bowed down and said, 'I am yours, for you are so beautiful'.

'Yes, death-in-life is the spiritual truth. This body is the cross, and we have to bear it and pass.'

One morning I brought him two bound volumes of the Report of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1891. And he beamed on and looked at me and said, 'You know how strange it is. Both man and nature work for me. I wanted this book and it is on my table. 'Don't desire, only deserve,' this is the secret of the fulfilment of desires. You draw the bow-string and it is only when you relax it, that the arrow flies. You must give up all desires, before your desire is fulfilled. When you desire you are modifying the whole universe for its fulfilment. It must be fulfilled. You are God. All your thoughts are bound to become things, realities. Only renounce.

'Fill your subconscious mind well. If you fill it with ecstasy, your upper mind will flow with it, that stream of nectar comes

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gushing out at last from the great hidden depths. So you must not hate, because by hating you fill your real, subliminal mind with dirt and this is poisonous for your personality. In that great chest, have only your jewels and gems, beautiful attitudes towards man and nature, noble aims, divine thoughts, and wonders of ecstatic vision; have nothing else. That is the King's Treasure, have no rubbish there. This is the secret of a happy life. People teach do's and don'ts. The teacher who does not go and sit in the subliminal mind of man cannot regenerate any one. God must sit within, on the throne of that Universal mind, running through the deeper recesses of man. Only then is carnality eaten up. The body serves, as oil feeds the flame of a burning lamp.

'Be large. Renounce everything—keep nothing to thyself, own nothing, not even the body and the whole universe is thine.'

And he read and sang a remarkable poem of his :

For myself when I renounced the sense of possession,
All things became mine, as never before, as never before,
For myself when I renounced the flowers,
All flowers of the world's became mine, as
never before, as never before.

BACK TO INDIA (1904)

IN the cities of the Punjab it seemed all life had turned into brick and mortar. It was all walls, walls, partitions and sub-partitions everywhere. The Hindu system of caste had made even the plan of building new houses and new cities miserable. I almost cried amongst these heaps of dead bricks. 'Where are men and women? Both are crowded out of sight by walls. Nature is crowded out. Sunlight is shut out. Air, free air is imprisoned and it is rotting. Man is torn by his desires which can accomplish little for him. There is no free opportunity in the country for

genius to shine. The spectre of hunger stalks over the length and breadth of the land and all the people are ready to rend each other for they are hungry. Ethics and aesthetics are but polite arts of the idle rich in order to talk about them and justify their stolid indifference. As Swami Vivekananda remarked, rich men and princes of India are museums. There is no wholeness of life, no rapture of innocent and happy homes. The richest houses are hovels, they have no music of love, their hearts are empty, their homes are as living graves. The wives labour like galley slaves.' So I found in India that humanity is generally brutalized and demoralized by excessive idleness and non-development of material resources. Talk of spirituality and religion is all universal cant. And all boasted culture of the East was covered by a supervening blackness of false and dead religious routine that held all the groups of people in their bloody claws and ate of their flesh like vultures.

I felt sick. It was nauseating. The most intelligent men I met looked to me soaked in ignorance. There was no will left in the country to life, power or progress. No presences anywhere, only carcasses. Political leaders are, as usual, selfish hypocrites.

Moreover, the fact of my having had a dream-touch of life in Japan and my intimate and affectionate contact with the men and women of Japan had made me much too sensitive. I liked nothing in India then. Full of this world, they all denied it with lifelong established hypocrisy of Vedantic thought—all is illusion. Full of hunger of all kinds, and brothers killing brothers for a small patrimony, one brother trampling another brother under foot to advance himself to a post of honour under the British Government, or betraying the interests of the people to advance a dogma or a doctrine, or selling away the interest of the future for the small gain of a small community of the present; and then all the mosques and temples and shrines crowded with worshippers! What? Isn't it an organised hypocrisy of ages on a colossal scale invading the huts, houses, offices, temples, and mosques of the people? The country is doomed. The people are damned.

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Sitting on this heap of dung, I still dreamt of the Japanese home and life and love and labour. How light their architecture. How soft their voices. Noiseless the busy street. No cry of the child, no exchange but of mutual courtesies. No ill-will to a neighbour. The life of flowers. The Japanese men and women shone in contrast before me as the lightest companions for they neither thought of the soul like the ancients nor of the body like the moderns. Like the pink clouds of their cherry they were pleased with the brevity of life. The Indian pride of race being so long lived was on the other hand nauseating. The Indians tried to comprehend Truth which they themselves declared from the housetops to be incomprehensible and the Japanese took good comfortable seats in it to live it and lived therein. In the Japanese home, for example, no one is treated with such sumptuous hospitality and artistic delicacy as the flowers. Okakura grows intense in his expression of the Japanese love of flowers: 'In joy or sadness, flowers are our constant friends. We eat, drink, sing and dance and flirt with them. We wed and christen with flowers. We dare not die without them. We have worshipped with the lily, we have meditated with the lotus, we have charged in battle array with the roses and the chrysanthemum... It frightens one to conceive of a world bereft of their presence... Their serene tenderness restores to us our waning confidence in the universe even as the intent gaze of a beautiful child recalls our lost hopes. When we are laid low in dust it is they who linger in sorrow over our graves.'

But in India the people are abnormally obsessed by the uncanny sense of the death and beyond. They are afraid of themselves. They have no art of loveliness. Their cities are houses crawled together for fear. Their Shivas and Vishnus have not been able to awaken that interest in life that strikes root in this earth and only reaches its blossom in the next. The Hindus have not decorated the Himalayas. The teeming millions had no love of nature to create cities of gold on the tops. They have in no sense, except in a superstitious and a vague one, loved flowers, rocks or rivers. Their holiest pilgrimage places are full of human vermin. They have so

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ostensibly loved God that in their stupid ignorance they have killed Him and buried Him out of sight in a jingle of empty rhetoric, of confused metaphysical slogans. And there it has already showed itself in its outer bankruptcy of taste and inner richness of soul in the recent 'civilisation' of the educated in aping the European's drawing-rooms in the hot plains of Bengal and of Lahore and Delhi and in the centuries-long squalor, both material and moral, in their best cities of pilgrimage such as Benaras and Hardwar. And the achievements of the modern Indians in social life are extremely ridiculous. Their political views are soulless verbosity, bombast. What a young Japanese boy just out of his naval school can do, the best Indian thinker is forever incapable of achieving. The Indian boasts of his keen intellect, but it is eaten up by the canker of inane speculation. Metaphysics has driven out all artistic instinct and an average Indian is an insipid being devoid of capacity or 'can-ness' as compared with an average Japanese. Theological superstitions and communal biases brutalise almost every Indian; even those of great erudition and culture are stuck in the same quagmire, unable to come out. The life in India on the whole is hopelessly inartistic, filthy and barbarous as compared with the life in Japan. And the Indian is still so stupid that he glories in his artistic achievements of the past and even of the present, in spite of the glaring fact that life is getting more and more degenerated. There is no spirit of divine cleanliness in the social and public life, no artistic sense in the architecture of their homes and pilgrim places, no refined incompatibility of temper with the immoral squalor and dirt of all kinds that is piled on every door, in every street, in every temple and in every public office. And above all like all sick men, the Indian cannot bear the truth to be told him, i.e., that he is a barbarian in practical life. Alas, he is hopelessly demented that way.